



Public Charter High School

Members of the Council of the District of Columbia
Raymond Weeden Jr. Executive Director Thurgood Marshall Academy PCHS
Public Roundtable: Student Learning Loss
February 10, 2021

Good Afternoon Councilmembers and Staff of the Committee of the Whole,

Thank you for making space for Thurgood Marshall Academy and my peers to have a voice at today's round table. My name is Raymond Weeden, Jr. I am a proud father of 9th and 6th-grade students, a Ward 7 resident, and a school leader for 360 students, 80 team members, our partners, and their families.

When I was asked to share TMA's plan to actively reengage its high school students academically for the rest of this school year, the summer, and next school year, I would admit I was confused as the how is terribly complex. Because this is deeply emotional work for our team, I wanted to change how I would conventionally share. I've been taught to tell the story before making the ask. To be honest, our students don't have time for niceties. So I will start with our ask and share our why after.

Our Ask

The data is clear. Fewer students are on track at this point to be college-ready than we have seen in recent years. This decrease is more drastic across the board for subgroups of students with disabilities, at-risk and Black boys.

To focus on learning loss, we have to be ready to turn our rhetoric into action beyond just getting students to attend class. It takes a commitment to support our families and teams, planning now for consistent funding over the next few years, and flexibility to allow the school community to be innovative as we have for the last 11 months.

You have to be ready to come to our schools like CM Henderson did last week. Volunteer or, better yet, simplify processes that our families, teams, and students have access to the city's tools they need.

Like the District, our school communities will need the full battery of resources to come out of this crisis. Over the next few weeks, TMA will be sharing with our community a plan to help bring more students back to our building to stabilize our community. We don't make any assumptions that bringing more students back will be a silver bullet but our objective is simple, to safely open more opportunities for students to return to our building for meaningful experiences.

Our Why

Twenty years ago, TMA opened its doors designed to meet all students' needs and prepare each to succeed in college and actively engage in our democratic society. We believe that no matter

what skill set or circumstance a student has when enrolling, we must help each reach that goal. While challenging, we take pride in this charge as it has proven to be one path towards opening doors for our Black students in the District and world.

I highlight that terms like learning loss, combat, and mitigation generally do not sit well with our community. Our school and school across the city have been working to remove obstacles for our students, their families, and our team head-on before and continued when we left our building 11 months ago. We tried to make a path where our community could continue to engage in rich and meaningful learning with limited restrictions.

What are we doing?

Like many schools, TMA is trying to work within the health crisis restrictions to meet our students' basic needs. From sending students out our doors with technology, books, and materials to delivering meals to students at their homes, providing the internet for our students, purchasing new software, and providing resource funds for our team to provide quality instruction from their homes. We worked hard to keep our families in contact, each team member calling students weekly to check on their status and provide new resources as needed.

While most of our programming is remote, this fall, we opened our doors to small groups and clubs to use our building's resources to support their learning. This includes but is not limited to targeting families of students who struggled to attend online at home, to bringing in our volleyball team to complete assignments during study hall before they head outside (now in our gym) for conditioning. Weather permitting, our students have planned a volunteer day at the school this weekend.

Over the last two months, TMA has been organizing with other LEAs across the city to reimagine what this spring, summer, and next school year needs to look like. We landed on an urgent need to flip traditional summer programming on its head.

For those currently off-track we are considering extending the school year, or "5th quarter", to offset the transition phase everyone had to allow students the opportunity to pass courses with more time. This collaborative virtual and in-person learning effort provides for a critical SY20-21 "5th Quarter" for students who need it most. For students who are on or ahead of grade level or recent graduates the opportunity to take accelerated classes, mentor and tutor younger students or those who are farther behind.

Our hope is that we will be able to use The Summer Youth Employment Program as an incentive for students to stay with us this summer and rebuild some of the community we lost this year. If we do it right, we would have moved more students on track to be college-ready by the time each graduate from our schools.

This expanded programming comes at a cost and will mean a significant amount of collaboration from us all so we do not limit D.C. youth participation.

Good schools, both District and Charter, take the time to listen to students and families to learn how to serve them better. At TMA, we use a menu of methods to gather input and feedback from our community.

Our community has driven the progress we have made to reopen our school. The deliberate decision to bring our community to the decision table directly responds to the stress and question that we heard during our weekly phone conversations. Their hesitation to come back to the school too fast reflected some of the loss due to the health crisis and gun violence in our neighborhood.

Our Dilemma

We worry that learning loss is being discussed in a vacuum, which considers parts of the issues but fails to address those items on the table before Friday, March 13, 2020.

Yes, while there are students who have responded well to remote learning, many are struggling to maintain their engagement. The reasons for the disconnect vary by the student. For some, we know that by nature, adolescents are social. Many are expected to learn while their families are away at work, which has proven difficult without peer and teacher support. This is multiplied for our 9th-grade and transfer students who tried to adjust to a school environment where some have never stepped foot in the school. Other reasons include spotty internet, taking care of younger or older family members, and crowded homes.

We know from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, that all humans have needs: physiological (food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization. According to Maslow, the first set of conditions, lower down in the hierarchy, must be satisfied before individuals can attend higher on the pyramid. When talking about learning loss, I worry that we immediately look at numbers and jump beyond our foundational tiers. Tiers which honestly will not the numbers to what is needed without a lot of innovation.

All of the prescriptions that have and will be shared are correct. Increasing More time on tasks with quality instructional tools will reap dividends for our students. Still, we have to balance our need for more robust academics with the reality that our students, our teams, and each of you are doing this while working through the trauma and grief of the last year.

We insert words into our vocabulary like high dosage tutoring and accelerating learning without taking time to recognize that many of our students have lost family during this time. Others have been in states of crisis where they have tried to end their own lives; some are working other jobs; we know as we hear the cash registers while attempting to complete the class at the same time.

Critical Considerations

I am thankful that you are taking the time to hear what TMA and others have done. I ask that you take each testimony and digest it with a ton of grace. Like you, we are doing the best we know-how as we are learning exponentially more each day. I implore you as a District father, school leader, and neighbor to take the panel experts' advice to take action now to accelerate

learning opportunities for all students but start with being sure students, families, and our teams have what that need. I also ask that you use judgment to decide what you focus on and amplify.

Thank you for this time. I look forward to working to make a help meet the need of our young leaders and their families.